

# Crews that Thrive

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I've worked with two Crews over the last 8 or so years, the first Crew I was with was closely associated with a Boy Scout troop and we had what I think is the typical Boy Scout run Crew. We did very little else besides follow the troop around, our members were some of the older boys in the troop, their sisters, and an occasional friend. This model was very much limited by the Scoutmaster of the Troop not wanting to lose his older scouts to the Crew. My second Crew is a stand-alone Crew. We are not affiliated with a Boy Scout Troop and we don't actively recruit other Boy Scouts. Although our charter organization is a VFW Hall, we are very closely tied with Thurston High School. This is because our Advisor was the President of the School board for quite a few years and we have and had a handful of teachers working with our Crew. Unfortunately, we have had a couple of them move out of the area so they are no longer with us but we still have two teachers as Assistant Advisors. This has many benefits that I will discuss later.

Show of hands: Veteran Crews (>3 yrs), New Crews (<2yrs) and thinking of starting a Crew.

**Key areas of discussion:** Crew Meetings, Officer Meetings, Communication, Advertising/Recruiting, Program, Super Activities, and Leaders and Leadership.

**Crew Meetings** – A lot of what you decide here depends upon what the demographic of your crew is and what they want. If you have a Crew that is stocked with traditional Boy Scouts, meeting every week may work best for you. We started with meeting once a month, typically the Monday before a campout. This was a disaster. All we would ever talk about was the itinerary and what to bring to that weekend's events. We had little time for anything else. We added another meeting so now we meet twice a month and this is working much better for us. Structure with each meeting is very important. Get your business over quickly, plan a learning event and always have time for a fun game. You need to give them a reason to come. If the meetings are slow and boring the youth will stop coming.

**Officer Meetings** – A must! Meet at least once a month to plan meetings and to get updates on activity planning. Keep things organized and moving forward. It is also a great opportunity to train your youth leaders. Limiting the number of adults at the officers meetings is very important. From my experience the more adults you have the more they will talk and make decisions for the youth. Let them think for themselves. New crews - feel out your new officers strengths don't give them more than they can handle.

**Communication** – Communication is truly one of the things that my crew has struggled with. Initially we made phone calls, but ended up leaving messages that weren't listened to or were just ignored. Then we

went with emailing only to find out that a lot of the youth don't use email anymore. Next was texting and a Facebook page. This is working for us but we still struggle with getting the word out about events, permission slips, when money is due, etc... You just need to find out what works best with your youth.

**Advertising/Recruiting** – As with everything word of mouth seems to be the best. Have meeting were the youth are invited to bring a friend and do a special activity at that meeting. We will typically get permission to use the school's pool and let them swim for an hour or so. Or, have them invite a friend to go on a campout and run a special program for them.

My Crew, having the close association with Thurston High School, has a definite advantage on this point. I would highly recommend finding a teacher (male and female if possible) in your local high school to become affiliated with your crew. This will open the door to a multitude of youth to join your crew. Having teachers affiliated with your crew works awesome as there they are a major point of contact for permission slips and other information. They also run a table at our school's activities day. At the beginning of every year all of the sports teams and organizations have tables set up in the cafeteria. Our teachers run a table for the crew on this day, and have pictures, brochures, and gear set up to draw attention. Make sure to have a sign-up sheet to collect names, phone numbers, and email addresses.

Use the You Tube Venturing videos at your booth, during school announcements, or at any recruiting night or function. These are advertisements made by BSA National for this purpose. We had a great response to them when they were added to the school's morning announcements followed by what teacher/s to contact if they were interested.

**Program** – Campouts and other outside activities is the meat and potatoes of the Crew. If these are dull and boring you will lose your youth. Keep it fresh, keep it fun. Put together a calendar for the year's campouts early in the year and publish it to all.

If you find an event that your youth really enjoy, make it an annual event. We, for instance, do what we call Western Weekend. Every year in November we go up to D-A and Friday night we spend 2-3 hours in the barn learning about the horses and the gear and grooming the horses. Saturday we get up to the barn early in the morning, help saddle up the horses, take a two + hour ride. Upon returning to the barn we remove the saddles and take care of the horses. Then on Sunday we have the shotgun, rifle, and archery areas open for shooting. This event is probably our largest campout of the year typically drawing 15-20 of our own youth. This year we invited two other crews who brought 5-8 other youth. All total I believe we had over 30 youth and adults for the weekend.

Don't beat a dead horse, or I guess don't beat your horse dead. If you find something that your Crew really enjoys don't feature it at every meeting or campout. Your kids will get tired of it quickly. I believe it was PT Barnum that said "Always leave them wanting more."

Don't keep them too busy during campouts. Kids are so busy with outside activities like homework, jobs, band, and sports that to keep them interested in coming you may need to give them multiple hours of free time during campouts to just hang out and socialize with their peers. Sometimes this is the main reason for them to attend – that they know that they will get some time to just relax and hang out. It may sound strange but we find this is one of our Crews favorite parts of the campout.

Finish each campout with a “Thorns and Roses”. Have someone document them so you don’t have the same reoccurring “Thorns” during events.

If you have a small crew and only take 3-5-7 youth camping, contact other crews, or council to find other Crews that you can contact to see if you can to join campouts. This will not only allow you to do different activities, have your youth meet new friends, but may also offset the cost of a cabin. If this is the case with your Crew and you are interested in coming camping with my Crew please contact me.

**Super Activities** – I feel this is extremely important. This trip should be something that when your youth get back to school that they brag about going on an awesome adventure. Plan a major summer trip of at least one week. Venturing calls them Super Activities. Use this trip through the course of the year as an advertisement for your Crew. (“Come join us and go on this adventure with us!”) Start planning it in September utilizing youth interest surveys. Find out what they want to do and plan around it. As the leader manual describes, get a youth lead team to plan the event overseen by an adult who is capable of planning the trip.

While Northern Tier, Sea Base, and Philmont have extraordinary programming the costs associated with going can be prohibitive for many. My Crew has taken our youth all over Michigan canoeing and backpacking, to Wyoming and Yellowstone backpacking and rock climbing, to West Virginia white water rafting, rock climbing, and backpacking, and this summer to Kentucky for wild caving, canoeing, and hiking all in for under \$350 per trip and many were around or less than \$200. (And, the Wyoming/Yellowstone trip was for 2 weeks.)

**Leaders/Leadership** – Your adult leaders need to be enthusiastic, experienced, and love the outdoors and/or type of activities your youth want to do. Leaders need to work to connect with the youth so that they look up to, respect, talk freely in front of you. Treat them like adults, or peers, they will respect you for it. We also try to loosen the reins quite a bit. They are young adults, not the typical 11 and 12 year old scouts, if guided in the right direction and given their expectations will typically make the right decisions. Give them the freedom to run and do their own thing as long as they stay within the boundaries.

**Keys:**

**Crew Meetings** – Keep them fun and be prepared.

**Officers Meetings** – Let the officers make the decisions – You are Advisors and Associate Advisors, not dictators.

**Communication** – find what works, be open to social media.

**Advertising/Recruiting** – Word of mouth is best. Get your youth excited and their friends will be too.

**Program** – Remember this is the meat and potatoes of the Crew. Keep it fresh, keep it fun, and let the youth decide what they want to do.

**Super Activity** - Plan a yearly summer trip that ROCKS!

**Leaders/Leadership** – Experienced/Enthusiastic leaders, treat them like adults, give them freedom.

I don’t think there is a magical formula for a thriving Crew but the thing that will keep them coming back is doing things that they truly enjoy, be enthusiastic, and most of all let them have fun.