

# Increasing Attendance and/or Revenue

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## Abstract:

*Ritter Planetarium is about to close out its best year ever in overall gate revenue and attendance. This paper will discuss the simple yet effective methods we have been using to help make this possible.*

Many institutions today have static budgets that don't allow for growth and upgrades. Worse yet, some are even facing cut backs and shrinking budgets. We can try to make up for that a number of ways: grant writing, private donations, and increasing attendance revenue. I don't think there is any one right way, and all of these methods should be pursued. Because my background is in public relations, I would like to talk about some of the simple methods we've been using to attract our audiences and increase our gate revenue.

Ritter Planetarium just had a one-year revenue jump that surpassed even our best expectations. It is, however, a continuation of the annual growth that we've enjoyed over the last few years. The roots of our current success go back several years, when we started to use simple public relations and marketing tools.

I was a student assistant when we first started implementing a public relations and marketing strategy, about 5 years ago. I left Ritter after graduation to continue working in the field. Last year, I was fortunate enough to be invited back to Ritter Planetarium full time. This has afforded me the opportunity to see how our earlier and ongoing efforts are panning out.

Ritter Planetarium divides its P.R. efforts into three programming areas: school programs, public programs, and special interest programs. I will look at each type separately, but there are a few things that apply to all cases.

- Keep at it, whatever strategy you decide to use. Marketing and P.R. methods will rarely be effective after just the first attempt.
- Be ambitious. Reach further than you think you can by marketing to that town an hour or two away. (Only if they don't have their own planetarium, of course.)
- Make and maintain a [web site](#). Keep it up-to-date and put practical information on it. Form is important, but secondary to function.

Promote yourself every chance you get. Mention upcoming events and programs at the end of every event or program.

## **School Programs**

Programming for school groups is the single biggest source of revenue for our operation. As a result, we spend most of our marketing energies here. The most important thing I recommend is to generate and maintain a mailing list.

The Internet should make this much easier today than it was even 5 years ago, but it still requires a lot of "phone" work and research. Several years ago we found a map at the library that listed every public school district within 50 miles of Toledo. It took a few weeks, but we were able to get the address of every public school within that radius. We also obtained the names of the science teachers at most of the high schools and jr. high schools. The area Catholic Dioceses provided a list of all of their schools for our database. In order to get every other private school, we let our fingers do the walking and used the various phonebooks that cover our area. Every teacher that contacts us or schedules a program is automatically added to our mailing list. We currently have a school mailing list of over 2000 schools, teachers, day care centers and summer camps.

Once you have a database of schools, it is time to start mailing. For example, every September we send out a 20-page catalogue describing all of our school programs and everything a teacher needs to know to schedule a show. (This information is repeated on our [web site](#) as well.) We also mail about 3 one-page supplemental flyers throughout the year stressing particular shows. If possible, tie your featured show into the outside world. For example, we promoted *Santa's Secret Star* in November/December, and *Follow the Drinking Gourd* in January/February. The success this year of *Follow the Drinking Gourd* during Black History Month was invaluable to our over all year.

Ten or eleven months after a teacher comes for a program, we send them a letter reminding them its time to schedule for this year. This not only adds a personal touch, but it helps make it easy for teachers to schedule. It is important to remember that many schools only have 1 or 2 field trips a year. Teachers will keep coming back only as long as they are provided first-rate service, not just during their visit, but before and after as well.

One simple idea that has greatly helped our school revenue is the double feature. Because Ritter is a stand-alone planetarium, we only have a modest [lobby](#) to tour. A one-show field trip should take only about an hour or so. This is great for many schools, but some want to maximize their day. By advertising the [double feature](#) option (two shows for \$4/student, as opposed to \$2.50/student for one show) we are able to attract groups from more distant districts. Some of our schools are now coming from more than 1½ to 2 hours away. Many area schools also decide to make a morning or afternoon of it. About 1/3 of our groups opt for a double feature.

## **Public**

The general public programs are the hardest to increase attendance for. It isn't cost effective to spend as much money on printing and postage. But there are a few things that can be done cost effectively.

Again, developing a mailing list is important. I think the most effective way to do this is just to keep a sign up sheet and pen in the lobby. When we started that 5 years ago, we had about 700 names on our mailing list after 28 years. Today we have about 3400 names. We send about 5 or 6 one-page flyers to people on our list every year. This helps to keep a core audience.

Be diligent about sending out [press releases](#), even if it's just a copy of your current schedule. Contact every newspaper, T.V. channel, and radio station in your area and get the name of the person or department that you should send your information to. Be sure to ask if they prefer notices by mail, e-mail, or fax. I would recommend doing this once every six months, or at least yearly. The turnover rate for the contact people is often very high.

Public Service Announcements are good to send to radio stations as well, but there is no guarantee that yours will be read on the air. If you really want to be mentioned on a particular station, call up the promotions desk and see if you can do a ticket giveaway. This almost ensures you will get your name repeatedly on the air.

### **Special Interest Groups**

The best special interest groups we've found are the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts. They each have merit badges related to space. A number of years ago two student employees at Ritter, [Waylena McCully](#) and [Dawn Mulliss](#), developed our [Merit Badge Programs](#). They have proven to be the most successful single type of show we do, in terms of profitability. Because the merit badge programs are 2½ to 3 hours long, including observing, we reserve one night a month for them. We require the groups to sign up ahead of time. Most months end up filling up! Over all, this is the easiest group to do marketing for. The scouts have a built-in distribution system. We simply mail a stack of flyers to the area councils. They then distribute the flyers to their scout leaders.

Cub Scout and even Tiger Scout groups often want to come to our Merit Badge Program. Unfortunately, the program is designed for very specific requirements, so it is not developmentally appropriate for these younger groups. One of our priorities in the near future is to design a [program](#) just for these younger scout groups.

There are many other things that can be done as well to help promote your planetarium and increase attendance. It is a good idea to cultivate a relationship with the media so they know who to come to whenever there is an astronomical event. Setting up [special events](#) like all night observing, Astronomy Day, etc, are effective at raising attendance and revenue. With the infrastructure of your mailing lists already set up, they are easy to promote, too.

The most important thing is to always be asking, "What have I done to promote my planetarium today?"