

Public Speaking About Amateur Radio Before Youth Groups

As with any organization, younger participants are needed to replace aging members and to grow an entity. Until the 1980s, amateur radio was almost automatically attractive to youth because it offered access to cutting edge technology. However, with the advent of the personal computer, the internet and video games, many of the youth who might naturally have gravitated towards amateur radio are finding hobby and potential career satisfaction from newer technologies. The allure of distant communications via radio has been replaced by inexpensive global access through home computers for the price of a basic subscription. Such changes should give today's amateur radio operators pause as to how to make amateur radio exciting when talking to youth.

If we examine the basic tenets of amateur radio, there are still many attributes which youth can find attractive. There remains the thrill of distant communications, the challenge of reaching a goal under adverse conditions, the freedom to experiment and the opportunity to engender good will among nations and to serve as a patriot to your own country in times of crisis. Amateur radio is also one of the few licenses available without a minimum age requirement. Yet, it is also a license that must be earned by demonstrating knowledge, much like a drivers license. Thus you can appeal to youth that the format for earning an amateur radio license is much like what children will face to get a drivers license.

There are multiple objectives in speaking to youth. The first is to gain recruits, but the reality is that statistically only a handful will ever step forward on their own to pursue a license. Some will be fascinated enough to pursue careers in fields allied to amateur radio, such as computer sciences. A presenter may never know that his or her presentation provided the stimulus to explore careers in a related area. For the majority of youth, the message will likely be that amateur radio has been a vital link in the development of today's electronic technologies, that amateur radio operators provide crucial community services during disasters, and that those who are in the hobby seem to have genuine fun. The most we can expect from the majority of youth a speaker reaches is to leave them with a positive and favorable impression which will remain with them into their adult lives. Now that expectations are set, it doesn't mean that you don't give your presentation your all.

HOW TO FIND YOUTH TO SPEAK TO

Once you have your presentation to youth ready to go, don't expect your phone to ring off the hook. Numerous studies confirm that today's youth lead lives with jam-packed schedules. Many youth feel demands from two sources. First, schools are under pressure to meet academic goals and have little time to deviate from full curricula. Secondly, parents feel pressure to enroll their children in extracurricular activities. Amateur radio, like many traditional hobbies, is taking a back seat to athletic, religious, cultural and other youth forums.

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Fifty years ago, an amateur radio demonstration was exciting; today, unless it's positioned properly, it can be deemed a nuisance. Don't take this personally; it's a sign of the times, so the objective of this paper to give you the strategies and tools to make amateur radio exciting for youth and their families.

In order to get the message about amateur radio to youth in your community, let the public know that you have speakers available, especially for youth. With every public demonstration or announcement from your radio club, let it be known that you have speakers available. Have fellow ham radio operators spread the word throughout their circles of influence that speakers on amateur radio are available, and that they have presentations geared for young audiences. Consider a banner beside the operating table at Field Day, event stations and other public demonstrations that says speakers available to talk about amateur radio.

NON-SCHOOL YOUTH GROUPS

Next, target youth groups with strong records of active community participation where a discussion about amateur radio will likely be received more favorably. Such groups would include:

- Scouts (Cub, Boy, Girl, Camp Fire Girls, Indian Guides, etc.)
- 4H and fraternally sponsored youth organizations
- Church youth programs
- Summer camps
- ROTC programs

See if any operators in your area belong to these organizations. If they cannot schedule a time for a presentation, they may know whom to contact. The success rate for booking a presentation is higher with an introduction from someone already in the organization. If you do not have a connection, contact the local or district office and find who handles speakers.

Do a little homework. You may be surprised to find that the organization to which you want to speak may have some tie-in with an amateur radio event. For example, Boy Scouts sponsors JOTA, Jamboree On-The-Air, every third full weekend in October. A local MARS group might want to work with ROTC high school youth. The national office of a church's denomination might provide information on foreign missionaries using amateur radio to communicate in and out of remote regions. Linking amateur radio to some aspect of an organization will heighten reception of your presentation.

SCHOOLS

Throughout the United States, school systems have reduced the amount of free time for subjects not related to core curricula. The most amount of schedule freedom remains at the elementary school level, then begins to tighten considerably at the middle and high school levels. Again, don't be offended if school administrators don't seem enthusiastic about an offer for an amateur radio presentation or demonstration. Many may not be familiar with amateur radio and need to see how an amateur radio presentation or demonstration might tie-in with curriculum requirements. Here's how to approach school officials by grade level

ELEMENTARY – This is the easiest level in which to give demonstrations. Teaching students the phonetic alphabet and how to compose their name in Morse Code is fun. Think about doing a demonstration outside on a comfortable fall or spring day. Many times a school's PTA or PTO is looking for extra activities to incorporate into scheduled events, such as festivals. Be creative: design an amateur radio related event that could be part of a treasure hunt or race. If this is successful, offer to come back to do an in-class demonstration. Some clubs have scheduled in-class presentations in January to prepare students for School Club Roundup (SCR), which is scheduled in February.

MIDDLE SCHOOL - These grades mark the transition from the one teacher classroom to multiple classrooms and teachers. With more school systems trying to reach state and federal curriculum goals, administrators guide topics outside the mainstream of core subjects to elective classes, such as Technology or Computer Sciences. While presentations to these groups don't reach the heart of the student body, the presenter is exposed to students who are likely to have a natural interest and curiosity about amateur radio. Teachers of elective courses often welcome outside groups to come and present. Successful presentations can lead to creation of after school clubs that might be dedicated to amateur radio or include amateur radio.

HIGH SCHOOL – Here amateur radio these days is competing with cell phones, internet instant messaging, and interest in social activities. Hobbies in general are declining across all age groups, but especially at the high school level. As at the middle school, the greatest potential for success at this age group in a school setting is in elective classes and in after school clubs.

HOME SCHOOLED – This is the fastest growing segment of American education. Many suppliers of home school based curricula embrace amateur radio as a natural tie-in to studies in Physical Science, and parents of home schooled children seem more receptive to amateur radio, especially when its methods of communications with strangers is compared to internet chat rooms and instant messaging. See if there is a local home school organization and offer a presentation.

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WHAT SHOULD I TELL THEM?

Now that we have identified youth groups inside and outside school settings, what should you tell them? Kids are really no different from adults. Anytime you can invoke as many of the five senses in your presentation, the higher will be your success rate. So keep your audience participants involved and active during your presentation. Few children will devote their attention to you if the only thing you do is talk. Amateur radio lends itself to many creative approaches to discussion. Think about some of the following by sense:

SIGHT

Bring in equipment to show. Pass around a stack of QSL cards. Show visual amateur communications, like PSK, SSTV, etc.

HEARING

Have a QSO, even if it is staged. Show static free communications and how to dig out signals when static is present.

FEEL

Have components to pass around, have kids tap out their name in Morse Code on a key, let them touch the knobs and spin the dial of a rig.

BEGINNING

Any public speaker should be able to summarize their topic in a few sentences. Those who have had the greatest success in presenting amateur radio to youth have used two techniques:

- 1) **THE CONCEPT OF AMATEUR RADIO AS ELECTRONIC FISHING** – most kids can relate to fishing, and there are many similarities between fishing and amateur radio operation. Fishing teaches preparation and patience. You must learn to read the airwaves just as you do real waves as to where the fish are biting. You need to learn to try new techniques and strategies when you haven't caught anything. Then, of course, the thrill of reeling one in. Just as in fishing, you don't always know in ham radio what you're going to catch, but that's part of the fun.
- 2) **THE HISTORY OF AMATEUR RADIO** – Thanks to the blockbuster hit of the movie Titanic, today's youth remember the scenes of the radio operator. In a few sentences or slides if you're using a PowerPoint type presentation, tell how the tradition of public service was just as critical on September 11th, 2001 as it was in 1912. Let youth know that other youngsters like them have helped by relaying vital communications during hurricanes, earthquakes, hailstorms, blizzards, blackouts and even during terrorist attacks.

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MIDDLE

When possible, a demonstration is more powerful than any slides or handouts. Talking to an operator far away is more thrilling than anything static on a screen. Thanks to newer technologies such as IRLP and EchoLink, long distance QSOs via VHF and UHF may be more predictable than via HF. However, if you have HF, try to let the youth hear some Morse Code. There have even been operators who have permitted youth to try their hand at transmitting third party CW, with thrilling success!

Offer to relay to the group any QSL cards that come in. This is a powerful follow-up which lets the group buy ownership in the presentation.

ENDING

Let the youth have literature to take home. Whether it's an ARRL professionally published brochure or one you or your local club have made on desktop publishing, make sure you include where youth can find additional information. Include the ARRL's website address, the club's website address, an e-mail address and even a phone number for further information. Also include club meeting times, upcoming events and the times and frequencies of local nets. You'll be surprised how many youth or their parents own scanners that can pick up VHF and UHF frequencies. Many clubs publish their newsletters now only on-line, but bring printed copies as handouts to show what the local clubs are doing. Bring a stack of blank club QSL cards to hand out as a souvenir. As a final gesture, tell them to write down their names both using the phonetic alphabet and in Morse Code to keep as a memento. Teach them the meaning of "73", and say good-bye.

SUMMARY

The challenges behind recent societal changes don't have to mean that amateur radio is no longer of interest to today's youth. By adapting a page from today's video games and other media attractive to youth, a presenter can have success in telling the story about amateur radio when he or she is engaging and can continually involve his audience through techniques of sight, sound and touch.