Remember when you were younger and could sit in front of your favorite TV shows for hours and not be bored by the programs you were watching? These shows were something you could count on as a child; in fact, you still remember characters or episodes that made you laugh, even though you cannot seem to remember what you had for lunch a few hours ago.

This is what Malcolm Gladwell calls the “stickiness factor.” According to Gladwell, stickiness is the “specific quality that a message needs to be successful” (p. 92). A sticky message is one people easily remember; a message that will inspire people to do something. Many children’s TV shows have been successful in making their messages sticky, enabling them to retain an audience even after many years.

Fast forward to a few years ago and the dawn of reality television. Instead of actors and actresses playing characters pursuing scripted plots, cast members are voted off islands or charged with some decidedly—and ironically—unrealistic challenge. The beginning of the season seems fresh and alive but, after a few episodes, your interest dwindles. Then the show is cancelled and you need to find another TV show to pique your interest.

Your favorite childhood programs were different, though. What made you love them? They probably were interactive, perhaps allowing you to sing along with a catchy theme song you still remember today. The characters were consistent and you related to them. They were fun and became part of your routine before or after school. They also offered creative ways of solving problems, and as a young viewer, you felt fulfilled.

Reality TV typically offers participants their proverbial 15 minutes of fame. The formula for these shows usually becomes predictable after a while and you lose interest fairly quickly. Although the drama and competitive nature of some of these shows appeal to some people, the situations portrayed or emotions expressed often seem contrived. It is easy to watch any given episode and not feel fulfilled as a viewer.

In the final analysis, your favorite childhood shows very likely demonstrated a greater “stickiness factor” than present-day reality TV.
The Reality of Choice: An Example

Now let us think about life as a college student. How do you spend your free time? Are you in front of a TV or are you involved in clubs or student organizations? Have you ever been faced with having to cut back on your activities? Do you need to decide between two organizations and, if so, how do you decide which one you will stay with? This is the situation Paul Smith found himself in after winter break.

Late in the fall semester, Paul realized he needed an internship for the spring. After a few interviews, he secured one with a local banking firm. With a full course load and this internship, Paul realized he would not have the time to devote to both the Program Board’s Movie Committee and the Ski Club. Before classes began, he thought about why he joined each group. As an avid movie buff, he found the Movie Committee a perfect fit because he was able to see new movies each week. On the other hand, skiing had been one of his favorite activities ever since he put on his first pair of skis at age five. The opportunity to go skiing each semester also held great appeal for him.

Movies or Skis?

Paul continued thinking about his experiences with both groups. As a member of the Movie Committee, he was able to nominate five movies to bring to campus each semester. The Movie Committee members then voted and the winners were shown the following semester. Each member had the opportunity to be in charge of one movie night per semester; for Paul’s movie night, he ordered the popcorn and soda, reserved the room for the showing, promoted the film and showed it. There was even a contest for which movie had the highest attendance—the member in charge of that movie got to pick one of the movies shown the following semester. Although Paul did not win the contest, he came in second place.

In the Ski Club, the president picked the location for the ski trip without asking for ideas. Paul suggested a few places that had great slopes, were local and offered student discounts. Even though the president appeared to listen to Paul’s suggestions, he never brought them up at a meeting, instead picking a trip that was farther away and more expensive because he wanted to go there. Several members of the Ski Club were also on the soccer team with the president. Any time one of these members suggested a fundraiser, the president agreed with it, regardless of what the remaining club members thought or suggested. Paul considered about how frustrating that felt.

Paul also remembered the weekly meetings and the people he had met in each group. The Ski Club meetings were boring, as the president spoke the entire time. Also, the meetings were often disorganized and the executive members usually came late and without agendas ready.

Movie Committee meetings, on the other hand, were fun and social, and the chair gave members the opportunity to run a meeting if they wanted the experience. Because the Movie Committee met at 7 pm, members sometimes met in the dining hall for dinner. Paul had met a lot of his friends while serving on the Movie Committee. Also, the chair always e-mailed agendas to the members the night before the meeting, allowing time for everyone to brainstorm new ideas.

An Easy Choice

The more Paul thought about his decision, the easier it became. Not surprisingly, he decided to leave the Ski Club and stay with the Movie Committee, where he felt part of the decision-making process and enjoyed an engaging social situation that involved a number of his friends. In Paul’s final analysis, the Movie Committee enjoyed a greater “stickiness factor.”

Make Your Student Groups “Sticky”

So the real question for you as you strive to keep students involved in your organizations is, as Malcolm Gladwell indicated, how do you now make them “sticky”? What practices should you follow to keep people tuned in?

Sometimes we all need to go back to basics, like our favorite childhood TV shows. Remember the first club or organization you joined. Why did you join it? Key reasons why freshman or sophomore students join new groups and stay involved are to meet new people and make friends.

To Make Your Student Group “Sticky:”

- Be aware of the message you send.
- Teach while you work and play.
- Help members feel needed, and.
- Keep them coming back.

Be Aware of the Message You Send

What is the message your organization is sending? Do your group members feel welcome? Our favorite childhood TV shows made us feel happy as we welcomed them into our lives every week; make sure your group members feel the same way about your organization. To help accomplish that, regularly introduce new team-building games, eat meals together or have organization leaders drop by group members’ rooms. These actions will send positive “sticky” messages to them.

Teach While You Work and Play

Part of the “stickiness” of our favorite childhood shows came from the fact that we learned from them. As a college student, you likely also want to learn from
your involvement in campus activities. Maybe you joined a group because it was related in some way to your major and you were looking to make connections. Graduation may be around the corner and future employers will be looking for leadership skills you have developed.

It is important for student organization leaders to give group members the opportunity to take on leadership roles and learn new skills similar, in a way, to the learning you took from your favorite childhood TV show. It is crucial to make your group members’ involvement worthwhile. As a child, would you have continued to watch a TV show that did not keep your attention? No, you would have found something else to watch or a toy to play with instead. Remember that your group members’ time is valuable, and if they are going to stay with your organization, they must have the opportunity to learn new skills and take on leadership roles if they choose.

**Common Reasons Students Join Organizations**

- To meet people and make friends; and
- To learn new skills and have leadership experiences.

**Help Members Feel Needed**

Make sure students feel useful and needed by the organization and invested in the process of fulfilling the group’s mission. As the leader, it is important for you to delegate some of your responsibilities to members, making sure everyone has a job and no one feels left out. You also want members to feel their opinions matter. The next time you need to make a decision about a particular program or idea, take a vote.

**Keep Them Coming Back**

In the world of television, the goal for a TV show is to keep its audience so it can return season after season. In your group, you want your members to return week after week. A successful TV show knows its audience, and to lead a successful organization with motivated members, you need to know yours. It is crucial that you survey your members to know what motivates them. What keeps one member tuned in may be different from what appeals to another.

An important way to keep members tuned in is to recognize their hard work and accomplishments. Leave them personal notes expressing satisfaction with their work, celebrate reaching a goal with them, or give awards in a special ceremony.

Always remember that there must be a balance of fun and work in your group. Be an example for your members. If you are not enthusiastic, they probably won’t be, either. It is your responsibility as a leader to keep students excited and involved.

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**Above All, Give Them What They Want**

Let’s go back to Paul’s example. He chose to stay with the Movie Committee because he felt important, he was a contributing member of the group and he had fun.

Now think about your group and its members. Why do you want them to stay tuned in? How are you going to accomplish this? Sometimes you need to remember why your members chose to be involved with your group in the first place—was it to learn leadership skills or meet new friends? A key to being successful in keeping your members involved is learning what they want from involvement and ensuring they get it.

In the end, you want to make sure their experiences with your group are as memorable as their favorite childhood TV show.

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**References**


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