

How to motivate teenagers to grow spiritually without using rewards, gimmicks, and gadgets

ban the bribe

Bribery is a common practice in youth ministry. We'll use *anything-gifts* and gadgets, treasures and treats-to motivate our kids to do something. *Candy prizes.*

Good behavior on the bus? *Ice cream treats.*
Attendance records?

The rewards strategy is a baited trap that can snap shut on your ministry. If you use rewards to motivate, you've probably heard your teenagers say things such as:

"What do we get next week?"

"We'll do it if you_."

"What's in it for me?"

"Does it count for anything?"

External motivators produce some not-so-rewarding consequences. Several reasons why reward motivators fail.

Rewards ignore the reasons. Why won't teenagers behave unless you dangle a treat in front of them? Why won't kids bring their friends without incentives? If you must trick them with a treat, then the reason's weak.

Rewards discourage risk taking.

Rewards rupture relationships. Kid against kid. Parent against leader. Leader against teenager. Ultimately, to have a winner there must also be losers. Should the church be in the business of creating losers?

Rewards punish. In the end, the sweet treat is a bitter pill. Ever notice how some teams or individuals simply quit trying once failure is imminent? The problem is rewards do *work*. External motivators almost always produce the desired results. Teenagers do bring buddies. They do behave better. But what happens when we "massage the message" by dangling a bribe in front of our kids? We teach them that there's no intrinsic merit to what we're teaching about or asking them to do. The greatest test of a bribe is to simply remove it and see what happens. If you can't motivate your teenagers without bribing them, then something's wrong.

feed the need, not the greed

So what's the solution? Simple. Your stomach stirs only when it's seeking sustenance. And nothing satisfies that hunger like real food- a starving man doesn't need a gimmick to motivate him to eat. In the same way, teenagers are hungry for spiritual food. They're starving for attention. Their souls are growling for grace. So feed their need, not their greed.

Every teenager has six basic needs they're hungry to meet. Youth ministries that focus on these "growls" will find little need to dole out gifts and gimmicks to win kids' hearts.

1. The Growl of Grace

All teenagers hunger for unconditional love. Youth ministries that plot a "conspiracy of grace" will draw kids more powerfully than those that plan silly contests. Ironically, gimmicks and bribes short-circuit grace. Grace is unmerited favor- you're a winner even if you're last. So how do you foster grace? First, make forgiveness a bedrock for your ministry. Grace forgives the past, fortifies the present, and points toward the future. Grace-full youth ministries don't hold grudges. Kids make mistakes and messes, so mop up and move on.

Second, encourage and affirm your teenagers at every possible opportunity. Adolescence is a minefield of bombs that can dismember a teenager's body, soul, and mind. Sometimes our affirming words are the only bomb-defusers in our kids' lives.

Third, give your teenagers a dream that will drive them forward. Carve out a vision for their lives that says, "You can do more than you think or believe with your God-given gifts."

Fourth, be patient with them. It's a microwave world, but some of your kids won't finish cooking for decades.

2. The Growl of Relationships

All teenagers hunger to connect with others. But gimmicky motivators rupture relationships, and treats rarely trump trust.

Relational ministry is fueled by honesty, accountability, openness, and a fierce

commitment to the truth. Nothing draws teenagers into a youth group more powerfully than the prospect of deep personal relationships. A reward-based ministry, however, communicates to outsiders that the group is all about winners, losers, alliances, guardedness, and an underlying Christianized strife.

3. The Growl of Ownership

The power to change, control, and contribute is a primary

need for every young person. But despite proclamations that "kids are the church of today," few congregations live those words. Consequently, few teenagers ever discover how they can contribute to their congregations. Ownership translates to young people who lead and serve in ways that make a difference in the life of the church. I believe the reason teenagers graduate from church after high school is simply that they've never owned the ministry of the church. What they *have* learned is this: "Do your time and don't rock the boat." When was the last time a teenager served on a church committee? helped lead a program? offered a devotional thought during the prayer service? used his PowerPoint skills to add spice to the sermon? or used her computer skills to revamp the church's Web site? Everybody can contribute!

4. The Growl of Worth

If power comes in ownership, then purpose rises from worthiness. Adolescents are desperately seeking purpose and identity. Who am I? Do I matter? Am I a significant person to others? To satisfy this craving, many kids act out. The green hair, wild clothes, salty conversation, and disruptions are growls that need feeding. Ignore them and they'll worsen. The secret is to continually affirm your kids' purpose.

5. The Growl of Laughter

Everybody wants to have fun. Show me a youth group that laughs a lot, and I'll show you a bunch of kids ripe to change the world. Ministry, by its very nature, requires a smile.

6. The Growl of Safety

The most foundational. Unless kids have a sense of protection and provision, the other needs will never be met. A teenager's world is filled with first loves, final breakups, forgotten promises, friends' betrayals, and a host of other decidedly unsafe experiences. They're hoping for healing and seeking sanctuary wherever they can find it. Stress prayer with young people. Use small groups, trios, and partners. Pray at the beginning and end. Pray silently and aloud. Pray short and long. Pray by grouping different classes together (seniors, juniors, sophomores, freshmen). Pray inside and outside..Emphasis on prayer gives kids many opportunities to share their troubles and trials- and receive strength and encouragement in return. Emotional protection is also a key. The church should be the last place a teenager experiences persecution. Doesn't your heart break when a visitor attends and obviously doesn't fit in? If you can't belong at church, where will you belong? Safety also has a physical component. Are your meeting times planned during teen-friendly hours? What about the heating or cooling in your meeting area? How about the lighting? What about nutritious snacks? How about the room arrangement?

Does it take more work to feed needs instead of greed? Maybe. But you get what you grow. If you want a divisive, derisive, and discouraging youth group, then feed the greed. But if you really want mature teenagers committed to discipleship and dialogue, respect and revival, then nourish the need. What you win them, with is what you'll keep them with.

rethinking rewards

six ways to use rewards:

- . Get rewards out of your teenagers' faces.
- . Offer rewards after the fact, as a surprise.
- . Never turn the quest for rewards into a contest.
- . Make rewards similar as possible to the task.
- . Give people as much choice as possible about how rewards are used.
- . Try to immunize individuals against the "motivation" killing effects of rewards.