



Recruiting Premarital Couples for Marriage Education

How to Guide

October 2009

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Background

An engagement is an exciting time in a couple's life. They now look forward to the beginning of a new life together and the joining of two families. While most couples spend hours planning for the wedding, focused on dresses, cakes, photographers and

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seating arrangements, very few couples, unless they are required to do so by the church/synagogue performing the ceremony, focus their time on preparing for marriage. Premarital education or counseling can provide the basic relationship skills that couples need to form a healthy, successful marriage. Studies show that premarital education is effective in improving couple satisfaction overall.¹

According to practitioners, there are two general reasons why couples do not participate in premarital education courses. The first is a lack of awareness of their existence or benefit. The second is that the period of engagement is one during which couples look at each other through "rose-colored glasses." Despite seeing divorce among their friends and families, the "it won't happen to us" syndrome is alive and well. This how-to guide provides tips, strategies

and sample materials to help workshop leaders engage this difficult-to-reach population. Keep in mind that the techniques provided in this material are geared toward a younger, first-time-married, engaged population.

Issues to Consider

Time Is of the Essence

Couples planning their wedding are immersed in the details of their big day and often do not have the desire or the time to participate in

premarital education. Because this is not a priority for their relationship during this time, couples often will disregard opportunities to enroll in a marriage education workshop. To successfully recruit engaged couples, workshop leaders must convince potential participants that the initial investment of time in marriage education will create lifelong benefits to their marriage.



¹ Macomber, J.E., Murray, J., Reardon-Anderson, J., & Stagner, M. (2005). Systematic Review of the Impact of Marriage and Relationship Programs [electronic version]. *Urban Institute*. Retrieved August 3, 2009, from http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/411142_impact_marriage.pdf.

Marriage Counseling Is Taboo

While research tells us that premarital education lays a foundation for a healthy marriage, it is often considered taboo for couples to seek premarital counseling in any form. The perception, albeit false, is that couples who seek professional guidance before their marriage are experiencing difficulties in their relationship and require an intervention before they say, “I do.” Fortunately, this perception is becoming less prevalent as premarital education becomes a pre-ceremony requirement for many wedding officiates.

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Recruiting Men Is Difficult

It is generally difficult to recruit men to relationship education workshops. The fear they may have of “sharing their feelings” or participating in “group hugs” does not endear them to the idea of forfeiting their

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spare time to marriage education. Add this endeavor to their begrudging assistance with the wedding planning and there is little tolerance to spare for all things deemed “girly”; thus, recruitment of grooms becomes almost impossible.

One of the most effective ways to establish rapport with men is to have a male staff member working at the event or signing an email/letter. Your male recruiter should be able to address guys’ concerns, values and beliefs about marriage. For more information about engaging men at intake and during the workshop, please see the NHMRC’s How-to Guide, “Engaging Men in Marriage Education.”

Recruitment materials should appeal to a man’s inherent desire to fix things by highlighting learning efficient problem-solving and conflict resolution skills. It is also important to send the message that men are okay the way they are and do not require fixing. The best way to do this is to accentuate problem-solving tools, solution-based insights and the positive elements of marriage (“keys”) that emphasize successful outcomes. For instance, “solve problems and create solutions” and “see results” could be integrated into your marketing materials to illustrate these concepts. Avoid using verbiage about sharing feelings, couple time, and talking more. Your marketing materials could use metaphors that compare a marriage education program to an automotive “tune-up,” or going to the gym for a workout, to indicate the preventative nature of the program. You can even integrate a sports theme: “Don’t fumble the ball! Learn the skills

you need to keep your relationship strong.”Also, materials could underscore the wider array of skills-application such

as more effective communication, conflict resolution, and anger management—be sure to highlight that all these skills can be used in the workplace! Finally, you could emphasize the importance of fathers and that having a solid marriage is part of being a good father. Your materials should have pictures of men on them and be diverse in age range and racial background. Pay close attention to your layout, as hearts and flowers typically will not appeal to the majority of men. Instead, use seasonal backgrounds that will appeal to both sexes.

Weddings Are Year-Round

Despite the adage that weddings primarily occur in June, there is only a 2 percent variation in the number of ceremonies performed each month. Couples plan their weddings based on dates and months that are sentimental to them or that fit within the couple's schedule. Program operators should recruit for services year-round. This allows ample opportunity for potential participants to take advantage of this service in advance of their wedding day.

The first step in successfully recruiting engaged couples for a premarital workshop is to meet with individuals in the wedding industry. Florists, photographers, caterers, officiates, wedding planners and wedding chapels all have the attention of this target population and can direct potential participants to you.

Guidance

Develop Community Partnerships

The first step in successfully recruiting engaged couples for a premarital workshop is to meet with individuals in the wedding industry. Florists, photographers, caterers, officiates, wedding planners and wedding chapels all have the attention of this

target population and can direct potential participants to you. The simplest way to meet these individuals is to attend a local bridal fair. Many wedding vendors in your community will likely have a booth at this event, making it an excellent opportunity to develop partnerships. When approaching potential partners, it is important to remember the following:

- ***You can help them to help others!*** You are offering a service to the community that benefits couples' lives. Many communities offer free premarital education programs. Most people want to contribute to a healthier society and will be excited about an opportunity to do that with no incurred cost (see Appendix A for a sample script). When approaching religious organizations, make sure they do not already have a premarital education program. Remember to put an announcement in their newsletter!

- ***Vendors often offer a selection of services at pre-determined costs (e.g. cake, caterer and photographer for one low price).***

The inclusion of a marriage education workshop will add to their package

value, at no cost to them, and allow for greater appeal to potential customers. You can develop an effective marketing piece, which includes your program contact and event information, and provide it to these vendors to include in their wedding packets (see Appendix B for a sample marketing piece). Do not forget the online wedding planning resources as many couples are utilizing these!

- ***You are an excellent and free resource!***

Wedding industry vendors host open-house events for potential customers and an on-site “relationship expert” is an attractive addition to their program format. Offer your expertise for these events and utilize the opportunity to recruit for your upcoming workshop.

- ***Consider bridal magazines or local wedding industry publications.*** These are popular materials that couples and their families consult to assist with planning their events. Most larger municipalities will have local industry publications.

If a bridal fair is not scheduled to occur before your workshop or event, invest in a membership with a local wedding association. These groups often meet monthly and provide a great opportunity to network with local wedding service providers.

Other places to market include message boards at local restaurants, health food stores, coffee shops and stores where couples register for wedding gifts. Make sure your marketing materials appeal to both sexes (see below for details). Do not forget sporting good stores, hardware stores and barber shops.

Bridal Fairs/Wedding Expos/Bridal Shows

In addition to being the prime location for meeting with wedding industry vendors, bridal fairs are perfect for the direct recruitment of potential participants. As the only booth at the event offering a “free” service, you have the perfect opening line to attract potential participants to your booth. Make sure you have a male staff member at the event! Once their interest is piqued, provide couples with marketing materials that describe your event; explain how participation will benefit their marriage for the long-term; and, as resources allow, offer the chance for the couple to win a prize through a raffle. Use credit card-sized

marketing materials with relationship tips outlined on them. This gives the couple the opportunity to work on something at home and may encourage them to learn more. If you have reservations about being too “forward” with bridal fair participants, remember they have purchased a ticket to view and talk to vendors. They are expecting to be approached and offered services, and are excited about the many possibilities (see Appendix B for bridal fair talking points). Try to plan your marriage education event or workshop within one to three weeks of the bridal fair so that couples have the “instant gratification” associated with participating in an event about which they just learned.

You often are granted access to the physical addresses, phone numbers and email addresses of all those who purchased a ticket when you rent a space at a bridal fair. This information provides ample opportunity for direct recruitment. You now have the ability to contact participants who may not have made it to your bridal fair booth and a chance to follow up with those who did. In some cases, participants may have purchased a ticket in advance and not attended. If possible, develop a marketing piece and mail or email it within one week of the bridal fair see Appendix C for sample postcard to brides and Appendix D for sample email).

As mentioned previously, recruiting grooms to attend marriage education workshops is often difficult. One way to address this challenge is by ensuring that your marketing materials are gender-neutral and, as available, offer attendance incentives that appeal to both sexes. Appropriate incentives may include coupons/discounts on other wedding services or a giveaway. Many engaged couples are setting up a home or planning for a honeymoon, making home goods or travel items appealing. When considering the date of your event or workshop, check a

community calendar to make sure that you are not competing with a local event such as a football or basketball game, or a city or state fair.

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E-Recruitment

Social networking sites have become one of the most popular online tools for this generation of couples. To advertise or increase interest in your program, consider using online services, like *MySpace*, *Facebook* or *Twitter*. You can easily create a *MySpace* page that can be accessed by anyone who searches *MySpace* by name or a related topic (such as relationships, marriage, communication skills, etc.). You can request to “add to friends” any person or organization with a *MySpace* account to raise awareness and interest in your services. Over time, your network of “friends” will grow as more people access your page through either the search function or mutual friends’ pages. Your program’s web site link should be very noticeable so visitors can review it immediately. These networking sites serve as an added outlet to get your program noticed. Please see the NHMRC’s Tip Sheet on Marketing your Organization Online for details.

Marriage License Fee Reduction

As a final primary recruitment tool, research state or local policies on discounted marriage licenses for couples who participate in relationship education workshops. As of July 2009, the following states

have reduced marriage license fees for couples who attend premarital education workshops: Georgia, Texas, Florida, Maryland, Minnesota, Oklahoma and Tennessee. These discounted fees often are significant and provide a key selling point for your program. Where applicable, this fee reduction should permeate your marketing materials and recruitment language. All couples appreciate a reduced fee and will likely be more motivated to attend your event if, in addition to the anticipated long-term return on the investment of their time, there is an immediate financial advantage.

Most states require that couples attend a set number of hours to receive the certificate for a discounted marriage license. Even if your program is longer than the minimum time required, distribute event documentation at the completion of your workshop so that couples will be less likely to leave before the end of the event.

Conclusion

This how-to guide offers some strategies for engaging younger premarital couples entering into their first marriage into a marriage / relationship education class. Strategies range from creating and maintaining solid community partnerships, recruiting at select events and venues, and utilizing print/online techniques. Remember to include both genders as your target audience!

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Appendix A

Sample Script for Building Partnerships Within the Wedding Industry

This script should be utilized as potential talking points; it may also be used as a letter to businesses.

Option 1 (where a discounted marriage license is available):

“We want to help your clients prepare for a marriage of a lifetime!”

“We do this by offering FREE marriage and relationship education seminars to help strengthen the great relationships your clients have and help them build foundations for strong marriages. If engaged couples attend and complete our [NAME OF PROGRAM] workshop, they will receive a certificate that qualifies them to get a Marriage License for only [COST OF DISCOUNTED LICENSE] (regular price [COST OF LICENSE WITHOUT DISCOUNT])!”

“Our community partners often include these flyers, which include contact and event information, within the bridal packets they give to their clients. I would love it if you would do the same!”

“If you or your clients require additional information about our event, please feel free to contact me! I’m also happy to attend any open-house functions you may host and offer my services, at no cost to you, as a community resource in the relationship field.”

“Thanks so much for your partnership!”

Option 2 (does not include language for a discounted marriage license):

“We want to help your clients prepare for a marriage of a lifetime!”

“We do this by offering FREE marriage and relationship education seminars to help strengthen the great relationships your clients have and help them build foundations for strong marriages. If engaged couples attend and complete our [NAME OF PROGRAM] workshop, they will receive the skills they need to better communicate with each other using proven, research-based relationship tools.”

“Our community partners often include these flyers, which include contact and event information, within the bridal packets they give to their clients. I would love it if you would do the same!”

“If you or your clients require additional information about our event, please feel free to contact me! I’m also happy to attend any open-house functions you may host and offer my services, at no cost to you, as a community resource in the relationship field.”

Appendix B

Bridal Fair Talking Points

- “Are you the bride/groom?”
- “When are you getting married?”
- “Want to win free tickets to the _____?”
- “Want to learn how to solve problems in your marriage?”
- “Have you picked a wedding date?”
- “Are you familiar with [NAME OF PROGRAM]? We provide free relationship education in many different formats, and you can get a [\$\$] discount on your marriage license by attending our classes with your fiancé. Our next program is [describe event, include date, format and time]. Does that sound good to you? I can get you

registered here.”

- “We are the only booth that’s not selling you anything...we provide free relationship education programs that are interactive and fun. The skills that you learn there can help you prepare for a marriage of a lifetime. There are plenty of great services around here that help you get ready for the big day...we want to help you with your marriage!”

Responses you may get:

- “I’m not getting married until 2012...”
 - “Great! It sounds like you’re in a committed relationship. We can show you skills that can strengthen your relationship, like how to argue effectively and listen and be heard.”
- “My fiancé isn’t available at that time.”
 - “We are always adding new workshop dates; if you’ll give me your contact information, then I’ll let you know when we schedule our next event. Or you can visit us online at [PROGRAM WEB ADDRESS].”
- “Maybe we’ll go to one later...”
 - “Keep in mind that we don’t have as many programs available through the holiday season, so if your wedding is coming up, we’ll want to get you in one of these classes. However, if you have a little time, our next big event is [DATE, TIME and LOCATION]. Feel free to fill out the registration card so that we can make sure and send information about it to you.”

Appendix C

Sample Postcard Text

Prepare for a Marriage of a Lifetime!

Attend a FREE relationship education workshop and build a strong foundation for your new marriage. Learn how to improve communication, manage conflict effectively, and keep love alive! Materials provided.

Our next class is coming-up on [DATE, TIME, LOCATION]. Call [NAME and PHONE NUMBER] today to register.

[PROGRAM LOGO]

[PROGRAM NAME, ADDRESS, PHONE NUMBER]

NOTE: These are suggestions, feel free to create your own catchy phrases!

Appendix D

Sample Email to Potential Participants

Prepare for a marriage of a lifetime...

The [NAME OF PROGRAM and EVENT] is a fun and interactive program that will provide you with key communication skills and ideas for preserving fun and friendship throughout your relationship. After completing this program with your fiancé, you will qualify for a [\$\$] discount on your marriage license. The [NAME OF PROGRAM] is holding this free event at [LOCATION, ADDRESS, DATE and TIME]. To register, please contact [NAME and PHONE NUMBER].