



The Power of the Tote Bag:

How Pledge Drive Strategies Can Improve Early Retention

If you are a regular listener to WBEZ, Chicago's public radio station, you know that today is the last day of their spring pledge drive. Public radio has famously been interrupting regular programming for pledge drives for decades. The majority of their listeners dread these weeks, but the station keeps on doing it. Why? Because it works! A massive amount of their annual budget is secured during these drives. The bigger question is this: If members don't like pledge drives, then why don't they make their contributions at any other point in the year?

Keen listeners will quickly realize that WBEZ has this down to a science. They know that their listeners love this station, but that they are also very different people who want different things. That's why throughout the pledge drive you will hear a wide variety of reasons to join, and why at least one of those reasons is likely to resonate with you.

Like WBEZ, we are asking families to pay for something they could otherwise get for free. In particular, we are trying to get our current members (incumbent families) to renew. What can we learn from public radio that will help re-enrollment season be as successful as a pledge drive? Here are some reasons listeners become members and some ways we can use these same strategies:

1. **Value.** More than anything, the pledge drive exists to show listeners how much this station means to them. They remind listeners about all the incredible stories they hear throughout the year. The station asks listeners to think about how important the station is in their everyday life. They read or play testimonials from members and new donors.

Strategies: Remind your families what your school has done for their students. Explain that their early re-commitment to your school is extremely important. Put together a slideshow of highlights from the year so far. Request parent, student, teacher, and alumni testimonials and post them on your website and social media feeds. Send home reminders of how much you value their commitment and what a blessing it is to be able to serve their children.

2. **Excitement.** The pledge drive is only a few days long, so they have to pack in a lot of motivation. They set weekly, daily, and even hourly goals. They name the donors on air. They offer incentives that require listeners to act fast. Donors provide matching gifts doubling donations for only a few hours.

Strategies: Set goals and deadlines. Offer a discounted registration rate to families who sign up before the end of March. Make your drive big and visible. For example, create a "Race to 225" track on the wall and move the car forward every time someone registers. Put the names of the students in puffs of smoke behind the car. Challenge the students by offering an ice cream party to the first classroom to reach 100% response. Follow up by visiting classrooms regularly and telling them who is in the lead.

3. **Incentives.** WBEZ knows their listeners want to give or even intend to give, but they need a little nudge, just like our parents need a little nudge to re-enroll early. This week's incentives for listeners included 10 raffles for an iPad Pro, lots of WBEZ swag, and a drawing for a trip to Tuscany.



Strategies: Give parents what they really want. Raffle off something every Friday from now to the end of the school year. It can be as small as a free t-shirt and as big as a one-month tuition credit for next year. Parents are entered into all of the remaining weekly drawings as soon as they enroll, so the earlier they enroll, the more chances they have to win (though no family may win more than once). Even simpler, offer a time-sensitive incentive. Families that register before the end of March get a free gym uniform. For students, the [NUT \(No Uniform Today\) Card](#) is as good as gold. Deliver it in front of the whole class and make a big deal. Do it right at the end of the school day. Remind the class that they can have their own NUT Card as soon as their parents bring in their registration forms and payment. Then send them out the door and watch them tell their parents.

4. **Inclusivity.** Public radio does a wonderful job of making members feel like they are part of a community. One of their most popular rewards this year was a pair of WBEZ socks. No one knows you are wearing them, but you are proud to be part of this club.

Strategies: Post pictures on Facebook of each family that registers. Take a picture of them all together and say, "St. Anonymous is thrilled to welcome back the Martinez family for next year!" Remind them how much they are valued and reaffirm their excellent decision. Tell them all the ways we hope they can be involved in the coming year. Invite them to reach out to other families and share their experience at your school.

5. **Exclusivity.** Some listeners see their membership as a positive status symbol. The ever-popular public radio tote bag shows the world that this person has chosen to invest their money in something that is good for the community and good for the world. It also identifies the person with the values espoused by the station, like being well-informed, curious, and dedicated to life-long learning.

Strategies: Give every registered family a car magnet. Ask their student to put it on the car right away. Offer yard signs or window posters. Figure out which families live in different neighborhoods and make sure they all have something to display at their homes. Consider "St. Anonymous Mom/Dad" sweaters or bumper stickers.

Take WBEZ's example and get creative. There are so many ways to move your school families to act. We were not able to include all of our ideas in this article, but we would love to share them with you in person! Please contact your MEM if you would like assistance with your marketing efforts. As always, you are in our prayers and we are endlessly appreciative of all you do for the families you serve.

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